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REFLECTIONS
ON THE
INEQUALITY
OF
RELIGIOUS DISPENSATIONS,
A
SERMON
PREACHED BEFORE THE
UNIVERSITY of CAMBRIDGE,
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M.DCC.LXXIII.

TO

LANCELOT BROWN, Esq;

AS AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF PECULIAR FAVORS

CONFERRED UPON THE SOCIETY, TO WHICH THE AUTHOR BELONGS;

AND

AS A TESTIMONY OF PRIVATE ESTEEM AND GRATITUDE,

THE FOLLOWING

DISCOURSE,

IS MOST HUMBLY INSCRIBED.

ACTS x. 34, & 35.

OF A TRUTH I PERCEIVE THAT GOD IS NO RESPECTER OF PERSONS, BUT IN EVERY NATION, HE THAT FEARETH HIM, AND WORKETH RIGHTEOUSNESS, IS ACCEPTED WITH HIM.

THE converſion of Cornelius, which occaſioned this humane reflection, is an event the more memorable, as it was introduced by two ſpecial and diſtinct revelations, and as it conſtitutes a kind of æra in the hiſtory of Chriſtianity. For it is generally believed that he and his family were the firſt among the Gentiles, to whom the Goſpel was declared: and, what is ſingular, the declaration was made, not by their own Apoſtle, St. Paul, but by that Apoſtle, who had oppoſed their admiſſion with the greateſt zeal. The propriety of conducting this tranſaction in ſo extraordinary a manner, appears from that peculiarity in St. Peter's character, which occaſioned his miſtake, — the warmth of his affection for his native religion. But notwithſtanding his great reluctance in conſenting to the admiſſion of the Gentiles; when he found the viſion preſented to the Centurion entirely conſonant to the notice he himſelf had received; each atteſting in its turn, the gracious intention

of providence, his doubts are overpowered by ſuch accumulated proofs; his mind is diveſted of all narrow notions; his heart is clear of all partial affections; and both are at once opened to the warmeſt influences of truth and benevolence.

The character alſo of Cornelius had its weight in producing this change. We may venture to ſuppoſe it from the little that is recorded concerning this perſon. Born in an age, as corrupt as any which hiſtory deſcribes, in a country abounding in the worſt examples, a Heathen by education, and a Soldier by profeſſion, had he preſerved himſelf free from the general contagion, his innocence had deſerved admiration. But in addition to this praiſe, he was upright and ſincere, devout and charitable; yet conſcious of great imperfections, far from relying on his own merit, or neglecting the means of further improvement. This diſpoſition, and the bleſſing conferred upon him in the inſtance of his converſion, concurred to draw from St. Peter the beautiful reflexion, "Of a truth I perceive that God is no reſpecter of perſons, but in every nation, he that feareth him, and worketh righteouſneſs, is accepted with him;" *i. e.* ſhall have the ſame offer, of ſalvation and happineſs through the Goſpel, which I am now commanded to make to this Roman.

Though this ſeems to be the direct and immediate deſign of St. Peter's words, I ſhall conſider them in a larger ſenſe, by applying them to the *State of Nature*, and the *Jewiſh Oeconomy*, as well as to the *Chriſtian Diſpenſation*.

Reaſon alone, if rightly improved, would have led men to acknowledge a ſupreme Director, and to pay him the higheſt veneration. For there never was an age in which the footſteps of his omnipotence were not equally viſible: the works of nature always atteſted his exiſtence and perfections, the ſettled order of the univerſe his providence. Men had always the ſame

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natural ſentiments of right and wrong, the ſame deſire of happineſs, the ſame conſciouſneſs of their own dependance. It is alſo certain, that virtue, by the general conſtitution of things, was its own reward, and vice its own puniſhment, to a conſiderable degree, and with a few exceptions. But in whatever manner it might have pleaſed God to proceed with upright, and obedient, — yet frail and ſinful creatures were not truſted to the ſole guidance of reaſon and experience.

For, as after the fall, the uſe and efficacy of thoſe principles was no longer the ſame, the rule to which men was ſubject, was not merely the law of Nature; but that law *enforced* by the hopes communicated to Adam, and *made eaſier in the practice* by ſupernatural aids. The ſcripture account of the ſtate of mankind from the fall to the deluge, though very ſhort, is ſufficient to eſtabliſh this point, while it verifies St. Peter's reflexion. It was not *reaſon*, which ſuggeſted to the immediate deſcendants of Adam the uſe of ſacrifice. It was not the *perſons*, who offered ſacrifice, or the *mode* of performing that duty, but the mind and principle which God regarded. In whatever rank or ſituation, thoſe who acted well, were ſecure of his protection and patronage: and, by the ſame rule of equity, notwithſtanding his unlimited love for his creatures, he " ſpared not the old world," when ſunk in wickedneſs, and incapable of reformation.

While the memory of the deluge was yet recent, there is no doubt that " preachers of righteouſneſs" were held in eſteem, and that the world in its firſt plantations was inſtructed by them in the worſhip of the true God. In the hiſtory of that age we find clear traces of ſuch inſtruction, and examples of excellence beyond the ordinary efforts of natural goodneſs. Even before the Law was in being, the ſpirit of the Goſpel appeared — in Noah and the Patriarchs, Melchiſedec and Job

— perſons truly evangelical, who, with an awful and devout complacency, obſerved the glimmerings of Grace at that early period, enjoyed the Promiſes in the diſtant proſpect, and adored the divine Author.

On the other hand, men of evil diſpoſitions made a rapid progreſs in the road of depravity; alike inattentive to the fatal effects of vice, to the natural warnings of conſcience, and the extraordinary notices which God vouchſafed.

Yet among this unhappy company *ſome* there were, who, alarmed at their perilous ſituation, and deeply affected with the ſenſe of their folly, repented, as the Ninevites. It was not *reaſon*, however, which taught that people the efficacy of repentance, or would have moved them to the exerciſe of it, if a divine meſſenger had not interpoſed. Thus, the benefits of revelation, imparted as early as the fall, were, at proper intervals, continued to ſucceeding ages, till the regular neglect of them rendered ſuch inſtructions uſeleſs. It was fit that an infidel generation ſhould be taught the value of ſuch bleſſings by feeling what it was to want them. To be left a little to their own direction, was the juſteſt, — and they ſoon found it the ſevereſt puniſhment.

For, as the number of mankind increaſed, and ſocieties themſelves began to multiply, together with new wants and deſires, new objects aroſe to ſolicit and inflame them: each act of irregular indulgence lent new force to every ſucceeding temptation; and to the influence of habit was added the contagion of example. Mere *human* reſtraints, however faithfully applied, would have been an imperfect remedy for ſuch complicated diſorders. But, ſo far from reſtraining, — what chiefly fomented them, was an artful and intereſted policy, watchful to ſubdue that ſpirit of freedom, which pretended to diſpute, and glad to patronize the vices which helped to eſta-

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bliſh its illegal claims. The conſequence was natural. Some, unable to ſupport their own reflexions, took refuge in Atheiſm; others, leſs wicked, but alike unhappy, ſought for ſhelter in Superſtition.

How indeed the light of reaſon, aided, as we have ſeen, by the light from above, could ever be ſo far loſt, as to leave the world under the darkneſs of an almoſt univerſal idolatry, ſeems at firſt unaccountable. But whether the deſire of knowing more than was needful or permitted, which was fatal to our firſt parents, in its immediate conſequences, was further puniſhed in the blindneſs of their deſcendants; and, in concurrence with their own miſbehaviour, brought on this dreadful diſtemper of the mind and fancy; — or whether idolatry be the laſt effort of the malicious Spirit, ever active to compleat the deſign which he planned in Paradiſe; — in whatever view we conſider it, *they* muſt have unworthy notions of the Deity, who can imagine that the honeſt and ſincere of any age or nation will be neglected by him. For although the vaſt ſpectacle of the univerſe, the wonderful mechaniſm of the human frame, and the deſire of tracing events to their cauſes, would lead ſober and conſiderate perſons to ſome *general* notions of a Deity; yet reaſon, in that early period, was a ſtranger to the knowledge and exerciſe of its *own* powers, far from forming any clear conceptions of the *divine nature:* beſides, *ſome* truths it pleaſed God to leave under the veil of obſcurity; others, which had been originally communicated, were obſcured by time, or defaced by tradition; and, as the age refined, were ſtill further diſguiſed by Poetry and Fable. Theſe arts, through their power of controuling the paſſions and affections; — of conveying inſtruction in the moſt pleaſing form; — of addreſſing the Deity in the ſublimeſt manner; were early introduced into morals, and cloſely allied with religion. Indeed they ſoon became

came an eſſential part of it. But Poetry, forgetting its original dignity and high deſtination, deſcended to meaner ſubjects; and Philoſophy, which ſhould have corrected the wildneſs of fancy, was gravely employed in unfolding its viſions. The chief exerciſe of genius was to record the exploits, or explain the perfections of thoſe frail Divinities, to whoſe tutelary care each diſtrict of nature was thought to be intruſted. After all, the true explication of theſe ſtrange corruptions is to be ſought, not merely in the extravagance of inventive fancy; nor in the prevalence of fear, ever ſtrong in the unlettered multitude; nor in the ambition of a few artful perſons, who make deceit an inſtrument of policy; but in the natural deſire which all men have of a nearer communication and more intimate acquaintance with the great Ruler of the world.

So much might properly be obſerved, to prevent the uneaſineſs, which ſome may feel; and the wrong concluſions, which others may draw, from God's permitting ſuch errors as thoſe of Paganiſm. We have hitherto conſidered Idolatry as a matter of mere ſpeculation: let us next examine it in a moral view.

Now this practice, how much ſoever it fell in with, and favoured vice, did not pre-ſuppoſe an immoral temper. On the contrary, it implied ſome principles evidently good, — ſuch as the acknowledgment of a ſupreme preſiding Power, and a ſtrong ſenſe of the homage due to him. Add to this, that it had the ſanction of a legal eſtabliſhment, and that, for a long time, men muſt either have complied with the forms of a falſe worſhip, or have had no worſhip of a public kind. We muſt alſo add, if we would deal ingenuouſly, that *all* Heathens were not idolaters — no more than all the true worſhippers of God have the ſame juſt conception of his nature and attributes. The character of Socrates and Cicero, their high talents, and the

the manner in which they were applied, confirm me in this opinion. Though unable to reform their deluded countrymen, they boldly oppoſed the prevailing ſuperſtitions; and, while they lamented the abject condition of human nature, contrived by their immortal labors, to raiſe and ennoble it. Their natural veneration for virtue, increaſed their ardor in the purſuit of truth; and the iſſue of their reſearches after truth, confirmed them in the regard for virtue.

Such inſtances of Heathen excellence will not leſſen our abhorrence of Paganiſm. We muſt judge of the ſyſtem from its general effects: — too ſhocking, and too notorious, to need a deſcription! Even the ſpeculations of philoſophic men were always replete with error, and often, as in our times, but leſſons of impiety. The ſame active ſpirit of improvement, the ſame penetration and good ſenſe, which in the uſeful and ornamental arts, in the ſcience of ethics and civil policy, conducted the Greeks and Romans almoſt to the ſummit of perfection; ſo entirely forſook them whenever *religion* was the object, that, in this reſpect, they remained, during the whole period of their glory, on a level with the loweſt of mankind, — with the moſt ignorant and untamed barbarians!

We will now examine the truth and propriety of St. Peter's reflexion as it reſpects the other grand diviſions of the religious world, under the JEWISH OECONOMY, and the CHRISTIAN DISPENSATION.

In every different communication of his will God has ſtill ſhewn the uniformity of his plan. The *Jews* themſelves, are no exception to this remark. The particular diſpenſation delivered to them, far from ſuperſeding an univerſal providence, accompliſhed its deſigns, — by preparing the way for another religion, which comprehends all mankind. By ſelecting the *Jews* as inſtruments of his providence, he ſhewed his common

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goodneſs to all, — expreſſed indeed with a juſt regard to the claims of the Patriarch. The very terms of the promiſe denoted, that the intended bleſſing did not reſpect him merely as progenitor of the Iſraelites, but in a much higher capacity, as father of the faithful. The very ſtructure of the ſyſtem is a proof that it was not particular. Indeed, conſidered barely in *itſelf*, without a reference to ſome *further* ſyſtem, it is a perfect enigma: but ſurvey it in this connexion and dependency, and all the parts of it are conſiſtent and regular. To what then can we attribute the very general and firm perſuaſion of the Jews to the contrary? It proceeded partly from that ſelf-partiality, which is natural to all ſtates; and partly from that influence which political inſtitutions always have on the manners of a nation. The ſingular advantages they poſſeſſed, were ſufficient to elevate the humbleſt people; as perhaps the moſt benevolent in their ſituation muſt have appeared inhuman and ſelfiſh. They had ſuch great and conſtant occaſion for the exerciſe of thoſe affections, which oppoſe humanity, that to judge of them by other nations, in other ages, and in other circumſtances, would betray the ſame narrowneſs of thinking, for which they are ſo ſeverely cenſured. Again, their cumbrous and complicated polity, at once both ſacred and civil, laboured under the load of external obſervances, which, though neceſſary to the great end of their ſeparation, did, and *muſt* call off their attention from intrinſic excellence. The whole nation was as one great ſect, wholly ſevered from the reſt of mankind, and animated of courſe with the ſame narrow and excluſive ſpirit, by which all parties are diſtinguiſhed.

To the peculiar character of their nation and ſyſtem, may yet be added the obſcure caſt of the paſſages relating to the future diſpenſation; — not fully underſtood by the Prophets themſelves. But whatever apology may be made for the error

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of the Jews before the coming of our Saviour; when he appeared in perſon, with all the marks of the Meſſiah impreſſed upon him; when he expreſſly aſſerted his miſſion, and at once both *explained*, and *fulfilled* the predictions referring to himſelf, and contained in their own ſcriptures; — their refuſal to own and receive him could proceed from nothing but a ſettled averſion to truth, againſt which all the powers of evidence were exerted in vain. Their ambition was diſappointed by the meanneſs of his appearance, and their envy inflamed by the declared purpoſe of extending the bleſſing. Ungenerous prejudices! that ſtill continue to blind their remoteſt deſcendants, though the ſituation in which they remain, is to all but themſelves, a ſufficient argument, how little God reſpects any nominal or accidental diſtinctions. And, in like manner, whenever the remainder of this people, impreſſed with juſter ſentiments of the Creator, ſhall awake from their deluſion, and acknowledge the Redeemer; their future fortune ſhall as clearly prove, how ready *he* is to acknowledge the relation of his choſen people; to remember his holy covenant, and in every point to perform his engagements with their great Progenitor. Indeed, were it not for the proſpect of this happy event, opened to us by an inſpired perſon, how ſignally ſevere would be the fate of this people? — jealous guardians of thoſe oracles, which record their own infatuation; but ſtriking examples of that contrivance, by which error and vice, in the very ravages they commit, co-operate to their own deſtruction; while the wickedneſs of nations contributes to the production of univerſal good; and the moſt avowed enemies of Chriſtianity are, to all ages, the ſtrongeſt evidence of its truth!

After this general review of the *Pagan* and *Jewiſh* ſyſtem, let us turn our attention to *that*, under which it is our happi-

neſs, — or misfortune to be placed: — what the event will be, depends upon ourſelves, and the choice we make.

Had the ſcriptures been *leſs* explicit with reſpect to the rewards reſerved for ſincere Chriſtians, the diſpenſation *itſelf* would ſeem to imply them. It affords the ſtrongeſt reaſons for believing, that thoſe whom it has pleaſed God to place under it, will be diſtinguiſhed by particular marks of his regard. The rules and reſtraints Chriſtianity impoſes, as well as the truths it reveals, have a direct tendency to improve our nature; and even without revelation we might diſcover, that men will be rewarded in proportion to their deſert. Severer proofs of our faith, when *required* by the Deity, are a ſpur to excellence; and when *given* by ourſelves, create higher degrees of perfection.

Beſides, if we conſider the *manner* in which it was promulged; the amazing dignity and condeſcenſion of the *Perſon*, by whom it was publiſhed; what he *did*, and *ſuffered* in order to eſtabliſh it; — we cannot doubt but all his true followers will derive from their relation to him, advantages peculiar and ſignal.

But then, on the other hand, it is equally certain from the *reaſon* of the thing, as well as from the expreſs declarations of ſcripture, that the influence of the Goſpel, and this relation to its divine Founder *may* act againſt us. For the Chriſtian religion, as it communicates a fuller and exacter knowledge of God's will, heightens, of courſe, the obligations to obedience. In like manner, the mildneſs of the covenant will aggravate every breach of it; the grandeur of the relation render every inſtance of degeneracy more ſinful. Whoever degrades that nature, which *he* has exalted, renounces every valuable connexion with the Son of God. Conſiderations, plain enough,

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one would think, to awe the boldeſt, and awaken the moſt unfeeling! And yet, how little fear or ſenſe of them appears! Nay, who could enumerate the fooliſh claims to Acceptance, that Chriſtians have imagined, while they have perſiſted in the commiſſion of crimes, which a true Iſraelite,— which an honeſt Heathen would abominate!

Indeed, when we conſider the proneneſs of mankind to abuſe *any* diſpenſation, and the impartial ſeverity with which God has hitherto puniſhed ſuch abuſes of his goodneſs; — When we conſider PAGANISM, MAHOMETISM, POPERY, with other fooliſh and fraudful inſtitutions; — all of them, perhaps, but ſo many proofs of offended juſtice, yielding up apoſtate nations to the power of deception! When we further reflect on the temper of our own times; — unleſs we are inſenſible ourſelves, we muſt tremble for the conſequences of the public inſenſibility; for the continuance of that careleſs policy, which allows a proſtitution of principle, deſtructive of every moral ſentiment; and a licentiouſneſs of manners, ſufficient to efface all notions of religion!

As the advantages of the Chriſtian diſpenſation are thus countervailed by ſtricter obligations, and ſuperior hazards, we may obſerve that the *evidence* for it is ſo contrived and conducted, as to carry with it ſtill farther marks of an impartial providence. For though it muſt be allowed, that the caſe of the firſt converts to the faith, and of all who have ſince been educated in it, is very unlike in ſome reſpects; yet, ſo nice is the balance of circumſtances on the whole, that on a careful and fair compariſon, which of the two ſtates is the more eligible, would be difficult to pronounce. The *general* evidence, however it may ſeem to have varied, from the different ſituation of thoſe to whom it has been offered, muſt always continue the ſame both in kind and degree, becauſe the facts from

which it ariſes, when once proved, are unalterable. And as to the *manner* in which it is received, ſituation has leſs influence than is commonly imagined. If the firſt Chriſtians actually ſaw the miracles of Chriſt, or converſed with ſuch as had ſeen them; if the accounts, which they tranſmitted, made a ſtronger impreſſion on their immediate ſucceſſors, than on Perſons in remoter periods; — yet we, who have no extraordinary motives to obſtruct our belief, and the gradual accompliſhment of predictions to confirm it; who have cuſtom, example, and authority to incline, with all the aids of improved reaſon to direct, us right, cannot complain that we receive the Goſpel on unequal terms. We read with horror how many rejected it, when offered by its great Author in perſon. But dare we preſume on our own fidelity under equal trials?

After all, is it not ſtill perplexing, that *religious* advantages ſhould be ſo unequally diſtributed? — No: for like thoſe of nature and fortune, they are the free gifts of God, who, for reaſons unknown to us, has decreed, that happineſs ſhould depend on other circumſtances beſides that of perſonal merit; though this, imperfect as it always is, will be chiefly regarded. Indeed, if it be reconcileable with the attributes of the Deity to have conſtituted different ranks of beings, what cauſe can be aſſigned why thoſe of the ſame rank ſhould not be diſtinguiſhed from each other? It is difficult to conceive how things *could* have been ordered otherwiſe. Were revelation *univerſal*, it would ſtill be unequal, — unleſs you will require in all the ſame capacity to underſtand, the ſame diſpoſition to examine it. Extravagant demand! which ſuits with *no* ſyſtem, which limits the exertions of divine goodneſs, and by overturning the regular gradation and dependance, annihilates every bleſſing that ariſes from them.

I have now laid before you the occaſion, force, and extent of

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St. Peter's reflexion, and have applied it to mankind under the Law of Nature, both in its purer and corrupter ſtate; under the Patriarchal, the Moſaic, and the Chriſtian diſpenſation.

From the reaſons which ſupport that reflexion, we may infer the following particulars:

The firſt is, that ſacred laws, though all directed to one end, and ultimately referred to the ſame Author, differ as widely in their circumſtances, as in their ſubſtance. Thoſe, for inſtance, which are called *natural*, whether we conſider the laws themſelves, or the manner of their promulgation, do not rank with ſuch as are of *immediate appointment*, or are *merely poſitive*. Again, each diſtinct claſs may have degrees of clearneſs or obſcurity, which the other has not; and may be guarded by ſanctions more or leſs forcible. And from hence it will follow, that not only the conditions, but the very import, and extent of Acceptance muſt alter with the diſpenſations under which men are placed.

Yet, how much ſoever the ſyſtems differ in this particular, whoever conſiders them thoroughly may perceive ſome ſort of balance between them: even where appearances are moſt unfavourable, there are ſtrong preſumptions of an equitable arrangement. The Heathen, who had no aſſurance, and but ſlight expectations of a future ſtate, yet through an exalted piety, or heroic benevolence, ſacrificed the enjoyments of life, or even life itſelf, was certainly recommended to the Deity upon grounds that no Jew, or Chriſtian can be. And, again, thoſe who were guilty of the greateſt deviations from the law of reaſon, as the rule of action was leſs perfect, would have allowances, to which perſons under a clearer light could have no claim. Heathens, Jews, and Chriſtians will be tried by the ſame teſt — their conformity to the will of God ſo far as they

they know, or are able to diſcover it. On the ſuppoſition of right behaviour, it is eaſy to determine under which of the diſpenſations it were beſt to be placed: and, on a compariſon of the motives to virtue contained in each, it ſhould ſeem as eaſy to decide, in which of them it is moſt likely that man would behave as he ought. — But the notions of man are ſo wonderfully varied, as even to be affected in oppoſite ways by ſimilar cauſes! Doubts and difficulties in religion which prove the ingenuous modeſty of ſome minds, diſcover the arrogant temerity of others. They invigorate faith, or foment diſtruſt, according to the temper of the inquirer; diſpoſing men to examine the foundations of belief with a patient and devout attention; or tempting them to treat religion with a prophane and diſhoneſt levity.

Perhaps I have dwelt too long on the circumſtances, which leſſen the inequality of the ſeveral diſpenſations: for, were it ever ſo great, who, among the ſons of Adam, would have cauſe to complain? Or, who could preſume to direct the Deity in the diſtribution of his favors?

The ſecond inference from St. Peter's reflexion ariſes from the very terms he employs, which plainly ſhew, that the intereſts of virtue and piety ſhould never be divided. *They* equally err, who, through a zeal for religion, depreciate morality; or from a confidence in morality, ſet aſide religion. Is it credible, that he, who has no ſenſe of his duty to God, ſhould be a good member of ſociety? Or, is it poſſible, that a perſon deficient in the common offices of life, ſhould ever attain to the graces of a Chriſtian? St. Peter's words are clear and diſtinct, — " in every nation, he that *feareth God*, and *worketh righteouſneſs*, is accepted with him."

The laſt inference from theſe words is, that in our judg-

ment

ment of others, we ought not only to be cautious, but charitable. Of all the ſpecies of injuſtice, that which condemns the ſouls of men without compunction, is the moſt barbarous. Let Chriſtians act conſiſtently with their character. Let them leave their brethren to their own conſciences, and unbelievers to the mercy of God. Far from pretending to determine the lot of thoſe, whom even St. Paul refuſed to judge, let them humbly implore the common Father of mankind, that all who have embraced the faith may continue ſtedfaſt; and that thoſe who are ſtrangers to it, may find Acceptance, for the merits of their Redeemer.

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